

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Billy Lee Lankford, #50053,

Plaintiff,

v.

James B. Gosnell,

Defendants.

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C/A No. 9:08-02165-HMH-GCK

2008 JUL 17 P 1:01

DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA
JUL 17 2008
REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

This is a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 civil action filed *pro se* by Billy Lee Lankford (Plaintiff), who is incarcerated at the Charleston County Detention Center.* Plaintiff brings this action against James B. Gosnell (Judge Gosnell), the presiding judge at Plaintiff's preliminary hearing. (Comp. at 3.) Plaintiff alleges due process violations regarding his preliminary hearing process. (Comp. at 3-4.) Plaintiff seeks damages. (Compl. at 5.)

Pro Se and In Forma Pauperis Review

Under established local procedure in this judicial district, a careful review has been made of the *pro se* complaint pursuant to the procedural provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915; 28 U.S.C. § 1915A; and the Prison Litigation Reform Act, Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321 (1996). This review has been conducted in light of the following precedents: *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25 (1992); *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 324-25 (1989); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519 (1972); *Nasim v. Warden, Md. House of Corr.*, 64 F.3d 951 (4th Cir. 1995); and *Todd v. Baskerville*, 712 F.2d 70 (4th Cir. 1983).

*Pursuant to the provisions of 28 U.S.C. §636(b)(1)(B) and Local Rule 73.02(B)(2)(d), D.S.C., the undersigned is authorized to review such complaints for relief and submit findings and recommendations to the District Court.

This complaint has been filed pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915, which permits an indigent litigant to commence an action in federal court without prepaying the administrative costs of proceeding with the lawsuit. To protect against possible abuses of this privilege, the statute allows a district court to dismiss the case upon a finding that the action “fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted” or is “frivolous or malicious.” 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i), (ii). A finding of frivolity can be made where the complaint “lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.” *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. at 31. A claim based on a meritless legal theory may be dismissed *sua sponte* under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B). See *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319 (1989); *Allison v. Kyle*, 66 F.3d 71 (5th Cir. 1995).

This Court is required to liberally construe *pro se* documents, *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97 (1976), holding them to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys, *Hughes v. Rowe*, 449 U.S. 9 (1980). Even under this less stringent standard, however, the *pro se* complaint is subject to summary dismissal. The mandated liberal construction afforded to *pro se* pleadings means that if the court can reasonably read the pleadings to state a valid claim on which the plaintiff could prevail, it should do so. However, the requirement of liberal construction does not mean that the court can ignore a clear failure in the pleading to allege facts which set forth a claim currently cognizable in a federal district court. *Weller v. Dep’t of Soc. Servs.*, 901 F.2d 387 (4th Cir. 1990).

Discussion

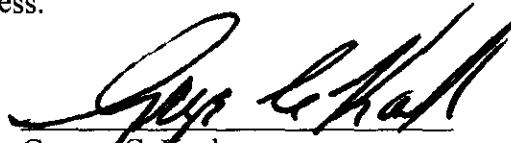
A judge has absolute judicial immunity with respect to his judicial acts. See *Chu v. Griffith*, 771 F.2d 79, 81 (4th Cir. 1985) (“It has long been settled that a judge is absolutely immune from a claim for damages arising out of his judicial actions.”); see also *Siebert v. Gilley*, 500 U.S. 226 (1991) (immunity presents a threshold question which should be resolved before discovery is even allowed); *Mitchell v. Forsyth*, 472 U.S. 511, 526 (1985) (absolute immunity “is an immunity from

suit rather than a mere defense to liability"). The Supreme Court of South Carolina, the Court of Appeals of South Carolina, Courts of General Sessions, Courts of Common Pleas, Family Courts, Probate Courts, magistrate's courts, and municipal courts are in a unified judicial system. *See* S.C. Const. art. V, § 1 ("The judicial power shall be vested in a unified judicial system, which shall include a Supreme Court, a Court of Appeals, a Circuit Court, and such other courts of uniform jurisdiction as may be provided for by general law."); *City of Pickens v. Schmitz*, 376 S.E.2d 271, 272 (1989); *Cort Indus. Corp. v. Swirl, Inc.*, 213 S.E.2d 445, 446 (1975). County magistrates are judges in the State of South Carolina's unified judicial system. *Douglas v. McLeod*, 282 S.E. 2d 604, 605 (1981); *State ex rel McLeod v. Crowe*, 249 S.E. 2d 772 (1978).

Plaintiff names Judge Gosnell, the magistrate judge presiding over Plaintiff's preliminary hearing, as the Defendant in this case. Plaintiff claims that his right to due process was violated by Judge Gosnell because Plaintiff's preliminary hearing was not timely, and Plaintiff was not allowed to be present or present witnesses. This complaint should be dismissed because as a judge of the State of South Carolina's unified judicial system, Judge Gosnell is entitled to immunity from suit for damages arising from his judicial actions. Conducting preliminary hearings is a judicial function of county magistrates in the State of South Carolina. *See* Rule 2, SCRCrimP.

Recommendation

Accordingly, it is recommended that the District Court dismiss this complaint *without prejudice* and without issuance and service of process.


 George C. Kosko
 United States Magistrate Judge

July 17, 2008
 Charleston, South Carolina

Plaintiff's attention is directed to the important notice on the next page.

Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation

The parties are advised that they may file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation with the District Court Judge. Objections must specifically identify the portions of the Report and Recommendation to which objections are made and the basis for such objections. In the absence of a timely filed objection, a district court need not conduct a de novo review, but instead must “only satisfy itself that there is no clear error on the face of the record in order to accept the recommendation.” *Diamond v. Colonial Life & Acc. Ins. Co.*, 416 F.3d 310 (4th Cir. 2005).

Specific written objections must be filed within ten (10) days of the date of service of this Report and Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b). The time calculation of this ten-day period excludes weekends and holidays and provides for an additional three (3) days for filing by mail. Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a) & (e). Filing by mail pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 5 may be accomplished by mailing objections to:

Larry W. Propes, Clerk
United States District Court
Post Office Box 835
Charleston, South Carolina 29402

Failure to timely file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation will result in waiver of the right to appeal from a judgment of the District Court based upon such Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *Wright v. Collins*, 766 F.2d 841 (4th Cir. 1985); *United States v. Schronce*, 727 F.2d 91 (4th Cir. 1984).